

Trials

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Summary: The beginning of a long life for Lok, and only just the beginning.

1. Trialschl

Disclaimer: Halo belongs to Bungie and Microsoft. It's not mine, nor shall it ever be. The characters in these stories are all original, though, and come from my head. Please, if you are intrigued and wish to use them, I am willing to give consent, but do ask, for courtesy sake if nothing else. Thanks!

It was a beautiful morning. The crimson and azure light shown softly over the rough mountains, painting a mural of color across the plain. The far off greens flowed gently in the wind that whistled between the huge rock formations. The natural valley spread out far below between the mountains. Its low rise was crested by fallen boulders, and shadows of the mountain ridges played games with the wandering eye. Big fluffy clouds drifted lazily across the sky, their masses reflecting the colors of the rising suns. The blue and red suns, rising together in the east, sent rays of their light across one another into a rainbow of color.

Arch looked down from the sky, his heart thrumming with anticipation. The soft clouds had reminded him of the gentle ships of his people, floating slowly through space just beyond sight. Sighing, he looked about at his company and companions. He would lead one such as this soon enough, but until then his was to obey, as honor dictated. About him on the shallow precipice lay six other Sangheili, making a Holy Phalanx of 7, the Sacred Number. They would need all the help the gods could offer, and so bought luck at every opportunity.

Three of the Sangheili lay near the edge, their particle rifles beside their heads, eyes pressed to the visual enhancers. Three others stood farther back, carbines in hand, waiting. The seventh was farther up the mountain, carrying both plasma rifle and Sacred Blade. He was their Crimson, and bore the burden of command and Rite on this

dirty quest. The communication module, with its large purple slopes, and gentle turns, sat inside the small cave at the back of the precipice. They had been here for two weeks now, on this holy world, living in the dark recesses of the mountains, coming out only to watch, and wait.

Running his hands over the smooth shape of his carbine, and feeling the warmth of the charge canister, and admiring the full charge designator, Lok reflected on his purpose. He had much time to think on this Quest.

It had been two weeks ago when he had received word of an assignment. His Blood Family had anticipated his first Quest, but to be chosen for such an honorable one as this was astounding. His first quest out of initiation into the warrior caste of his people, having just earned his name through the Trials, and already he was chosen for a prominent Quest. It did not matter to him that it was his uncle and Lord Teacher that had chosen him as part of the Quest, or that he would be part of Miyn Ketmee's Phalanx, only that he was going to go and face the Enemy, and that was all that mattered.

The day of Passage came to hand, and he entered the Phantom to be taken up with the other initiates, glistening in their azure armor, bristling with anticipation and pent up excitement. He had not yet received his Arms of Honor, but was certain his would be worthy of his family. He would one day protect the prophets and endure as one of the Honor Guards of the Sacred Circle, wearing the ornate red ceremonial armor and crest of those esteemed warriors. This day, though, he would be Lok Dakamee, and he would be a warrior of the Covenant.

They had not told him that he was to be part of a Watchful Eye Quest, or that he would be hard dropped from space in a Consecrated Insertion Pod. Or that he would eat rations of food chaks for two weeks, or that he would probably never face the enemy. This still did not matter. The Cruiser, Sacred Trust, had passed close the planet, and released its holy cargo of pods, 49 in all. The seven teams, chosen from the most patient and honorable of Sangheili, reached the planet, and screamed into the atmosphere. Instantly, the tongue of death reached out to strike the small pods and their precious cargo. The Infidel's weapons reached far but were weak compared to the Faith of the Covenant. The energy shields and thick composite armor of the pods preached their strength, and only five pods failed to reach their surface sanctuary. Splitting open on impact, the occupants quickly moved to cover, and began trying to contact one another, all but two. One of those two was Miyn's Phalanx, Lok's Phalanx. These two fled quickly into the mountains with their heavy communication modules, and weighty gear. From there they remained, the Eye of the Prophets, ever vigilant to the movements of the Enemy, ever watchful of the Infidel's and their primitive machines.

Movement caught Lok's attention, snapping him out of his reverie. He scratched at a bug on his arm, and looked over to his comrades. The three on their stomachs slithered back like Chuka Snakes, and stood. Miyn Ketmee returned soon after.

"The Infidels continue to arrive. They grow more numerous with each Sun Pass. Soon they will be as many as the grass that grows in this valley, and we shall be forced to cleanse them from the Heavens, instead of here, as Honor demands. Why have we not moved? Why do the

Prophets keep us here?" Fausla Esmee was never afraid of expressing his thoughts. The rest of us knew how to keep our mouths shut. Miyn looked up from his Guide Eye, catching the eyes of Fausla.

"Heresy leaks like water in your soul. You should watch your shadow, lest it reach out and bite your back at the battles greatest moment. In victory, you beg the gods for defeat? Do not trifle me with your whining, Esmee, and remember your place. There is a reason you wear the skin of azure. Do not think your station something that it is not."

Fausla drew away from the eyes of Ketmee, trying to become small, invisible. It did not work.

"We will report with what we have found. The Prophets believed that an immediate Eye was necessary to watch these Infidels. I have faith that they have vision, and so I watch. The Prophets are wise, they would not waste our lives or honor if it was not necessary." Ketmee slowly turned, looking each Sangheili in the eyes. The moment danced silently in the wind, and then passed. With a flourish, Miyn disappeared into the cave. The others spread out, Fausla Esmee and Mort Shatomee went into the cave after Miyn, to guard his spirit during the brief commune with the Master Commander onboard the cruiser above. Shir Mesmee crawled back onto the ground and brought her weapon back to her eye. The round flukes of her helmet, denoting her gender, glistened in the light of the morning, and reminded Lok of the early rise at the waters edge of his Blood Family's station back on the home world. He missed it, but only for a moment. Lok was too old, and far too courageous for memories to bother him.

The hard drop had been wonderful. The rush of adrenaline was intense as the planets gravity caught his pod like a Lokgolo's vice grip and pulled him into freefall, the air screaming against the grooves of the pod, creating an eerie moaning. The Cry of the Fallen, it was called. Honor to the dead of a thousand landings. His mind had focused on that sound, his heart pounding in his ears, thrumming the life through his body_. Such courage it must take, to do this into an actual battle_, he thought vaguely. The crack of Infidel weapons had pulled him from his thoughts, threatening to grab onto his soul and wrench it from this realm into the lands beyond, where he would serve the gods as a soldier to forever battle the Blasphemous. It was not his time, though, and soon the hum of the grav reducers overpowered the sounds of flak. With a loud _THUNK!_ the pod made landfall, and the front blew off to expose the darkness of night. It took only minutes to find his Phalanx and enter the mountain.

Lok laid himself down next to Shir, and brought his Carbine up to his eye. The scent of sin wafted up from the valley. There below lay the base of the Enemy. It was in four structures, one an armored vehicle barracks, another half sunken into the soft earth, filled with soldiers, and covered on top by rotating turrets to fire down the holy warriors craft. The other two consisted of a listening post, its high tower set full of communication and sensor equipment, and the fourth housed a large weapon, capable of firing upon the ships of the holy Covenant beyond the planets orbit. That was not why they were here. They were here for something else.

Miyn returned, dread in his voice.

"The Master Commander wishes for a prisoner to answer his questions.

Once that is accomplished, we are to cleanse the large cannon of the Infidels, and rain holy fire upon their fragile bodies. The blessed army of the Covenant requires a place to land, and they could not fly close enough to release landing craft with the cannon operational. We are not Ivory Sangheili, masters of shadow, but we have been granted a quest worthy of our trials." The small cruiser, Sacred Trust, carried upon it only 98 Sangheili, and the only veteran members needed to remain with the Master Commander for his final attack upon the Infidels. Therefore, the only Sangheili available were already on the ground, in position. They had air dropped in at night. If they had taken Phantoms, the humans would have picked up the energy signatures from afar. As it were, the seven Phalanxes had closed around the human installation, dodging patrols and open ground, waiting for the word.

The Sangheili gathered back into the cave, and charged their weapons and shields. They would wait until nightfall, when the eyes of the Infidels became weak. Miyn Ketmee prepared his plasma rifles, while the others spread out carbines and particle rifles. Each took two plasma grenades, silently blessing their fortune for the weapons of the gods. They settled down, the seven warriors, to wait and rest for the night's battle. This night, there would be great glory, or horrible defeat.

2. Trialsch2

As night fell, the darkness came to life. The night was filled with predators, and Dakamee was one of them. The seven Sangheili moved like shadows across the rough terrain. Infidel guards were out in pairs, moving about with goggles on their faces. They saw Mort and Fausla, but too late. The Sangheili leapt upon their foes, smashing their weapons into faces, and lashing their garrote beams around the throats of the struggling marines. The humans died quietly, their bodies pulled off into the rocks. As the last throes of life left the bodies of the fallen men, the other five pressed on. The compound was alive with music coming from the barracks. Seemed the humans were celebrating. Pretty soon, the Sangheili would know why. They needed a Master Soldier to answer their questions. They could find one in the battle. Before that could happen, the cannon had to be disabled.

The five Sangheili warriors, led by Miyn, raced into the compound. They fanned out, checking their holy armor, and blessing their weapons. As they reached the cannon's structure, they were addressed. The light was dim, and existed only as a single lamp posted outside the large structure's single exterior entrance. The other ways in must be through the other buildings, thought Lok. His blood raced. The humans did not expect any Covenant to be here. They would soon be surprised.

The human guard noticed the movement in the darkness.

"You there, is that you Josh? A little early to be taking a break..." The guard's voice was agitated. He knew something was wrong. Miyn's keen eyes saw the guard's hand reaching for the alarm on his belt, and his reflexes kicked in. The blue flash of plasma lit up the night, and the guard screamed as his insides melted into soup. Instantly, Lok Dakamee and Shir Mesmee were beside the door, setting grenades. The blast sounded louder than it should have. Alarms went off immediately, echoing in the low valley. The five Sangheili were

joined by their other two brothers, and dashed through the MAC gun's open wall, into the shadow of the valley of death.

Colonel Andrew Mush leaned over the table. His throaty laughter mirrored that of the surrounding officers.

"And you say you found it here, on this backwater swamp world! That's amazing! I can't believe these super smart alien bastards left this crap just laying around for us to find! And the Covenant, I thought they'd be all over this like ants at a picnic! What a catch!"

"Well, Colonel, sir, um, yes, it is quite a catch indeed. I, uh, think that, um, yes, it is surprising that the Covenant aren't here. After all, we did find traces of their temples here, but not a single xeno in sight. I don't get why they would leave in such a hurry. Doesn't make senseâ€¦" The young scientist was beautiful. There was no doubt about it. The colonel was drunk, no doubt about it. At least everyone was having a good time. The whole crew was here. Half a ship's compliment and all the marines it could spare. They had been here some year or so, but only recently did they need the extra personnel. Before that, there were only a handful of scientists and astropologists, freaks who got off on aliens. At least, that's what the marines thought when they arrived. As soon as the 'artifact' was found, the place was swarming with military personnel. Still was, as a matter of fact.

"Hey Colonel, here comes the lucky man himself!" Sergeant Brandon Bolfoot was a huge guy. He had Broad shoulders, a big chin, huge smile, and dark bushy hair. Bolfoot was big hearted too, until you pissed him off. Then he was big footed, kicking your ass.

"Hello. Sorry I'm late. Long hours and lots of work and all that." Doctor Frederick Nichols had a British accent, and was terribly anti-social.

"Don't worry Doc! After that find, you can make up all the excuses you want! More booze for the rest of us and all!" Private Sean Messin was from an Irish colony. Known for its whiskey and wild pubs. He obviously inherited the traits.

The astropologists were poking around at the Covenant temples, and found a passage down into the caverns they were built over. Inside the caverns was a strange complex, made of towers and a single spherical building. Inside the building they found something that made this the most incredible find humanity has had since the Slipspace Drive. Now, if this scientist and his oriental compatriot, Shingen Mato, could figure out how the thing worked, they would be rich, and humanity might be able to turn the tide in this war.

The scientist sat at one of the three long tables in the large mess hall. They were in the center of the barracks, underground to prevent penetrating missiles, if the Covenant had missiles. Around the mess hall were two sleeping rooms, a training room, and a kitchen. The marines had to eat, and eat they did. This night, food just kept coming out of the kitchen. They had finally determined what it was they found, and that they could figure it out, with enough time that is. Plus, they had just received reinforcements yesterday. It was starting to get crowded. Nearly 500 marines were all crammed into the huge room, with ten or so standing on one of the tables, playing electric instruments and causing a ruckus. The marines loved it, that

and the beer. They loved the beer.

"Where's Shingen, Frederick? He usually shows to these things?" Private Ariel had a thing for Shingen. Everyone knew. That is, everyone but Shingen.

"Oh, him? He's still working on that piece we brought back today. Looked kind of like a key or something. He'll join us when he finishes, or apologize in the morning." Dr. Nichols said smoothly as he took a glass of whiskey from a tray on the table. He sipped it slowly and looked at the food piled on the table. "Hmmâ€¦| dead something, deep fried, with roasted, um, nuts or whatnotâ€¦| and the delicacy, err, thingy, that sits wobbly in its own tin. We have such wonderful meals here, don't we colonel?"

"Ahh, you complain'in again there scientist boy?! Why don't you pull that scanner outta yer ass, and try to have some fun for once, eh? Cause if you don't, I'll find some way to give you latrine duty, and by the way these boys are puttin' it down, that's goin' to be a pretty ugly job in the mornin'!" The Colonel always had a way with words.

As the officers and scientists chatted, and enjoyed the party, shadows began to move outside. Slowly, they circled in, and one by one the guards fell to their silent enemies. The snake coiled itself around the encampment, preparing to strike.

As the revelry continued, a lone figure entered the large hall. His armor was copper, with a faint shimmering about the edges. The visor was segmented, and glistened in the light. As he entered the room, 400 voices fell quiet. 800 eyes turned and watched as the Spartan II strode into the room, shotgun in the right hand, held by the middle, and rocket launcher slanted lazily over the left shoulder. He stopped, and studied the room.

The Colonel cleared his throat and stood. Bloody Spartans always made him nervous. "Um, Sir, can I, uh, help you?" He knew he was drunk, but the Spartan was obviously paranoid, and anything he could do to keep this guy from breaking up the party would be appreciated.

"I'm fine. Just going for a walk." With that, the Spartan code named Black Angle, turned and went out through one of the exits.

"Um, Sir! That way doesn't lead out! It leads to the MAC gun! Sir!" Private Sean Messin tried to catch up with Black Angle, who turned around sharply and looked right at him.

"I know." And he turned to leave. Sean stood speechless, feeling like the drunken fool he was. He returned to the table and his laughing comrades as the party started back up, everything returning to the way it should be, at least, for the moment.

3. Trialsch3

Lieutenant Commander Tyler â€" 84, or Spartan-84, known here affectionately as Black Angle, or just 84, strolled down the poorly lit corridor. The dim lights arranged in a line above his head did little to dispel the shadows on the walls about him. These underground tunnels connected all of the installations here, better

to ward off the terrible storms that rushed through the mountains. It wasn't storm season currently, and he was afraid to say that he was actually beginning to like it here. This wretched excuse for a planet was a lot nicer than some of the hellholes he had fought in recently, and certainly the lack of aliens made it a much cozier place than his last assignment.

84 walked to the end of the hall, and accessed the key terminal to enter the research facility. It was a research facility, at least. Now, it housed a starship class MAC gun, who's sophisticated targeting computers doubled up as research terminals for the hot headed scientists out here. Saved on equipment and seemed good budgeting. At least until the enemy found this little installation nestled right on the border of Covenant space, sitting on top of some underground temples. 84 was sure that the xenos would be really happy to find 'infidels' getting drunk on their holy ground. And they called him unnecessarily paranoid. Right. He wasn't about to be caught by some Covenant ambush with his pants down, puking his guts out. He didn't drink anyway. It made him lose coordination and accuracy. He wouldn't have that any day, whether he was fighting or not. It was necessary that he always be combat ready, or else the moment he let his guard down the enemy will strike, and he, along with all the other marines and people down here, would be left to rot on this miserable world of swamp and rock.

Black Angle had heard once that this world looked this way because of terraforming. The water, well, sludge that made up the small oceans, and the huge shrubby fungi that passed for trees were supposedly transplanted here from a foreign ecosystem. The animals were artificially introduced as well. Honestly, he didn't care. Anything that flew or ran into him was going to be shot, plain and simple. Otherwise, if he couldn't eat it, or use it for a tactical advantage, it didn't matter.

As 84 strolled through the doorway into the MAC station, he glanced around. This was the observation room. It contained uplinks to the satellites in orbit around a few of the planets in system, and direct connections to the Chimera, the small cruiser keeping an eye on them from orbit. It was littered with displays, and tables. Seems the room seconded as a temporary recreation room for scientists and marines. 84 walked past the tables with cards, glancing only momentarily at the displays. They all seemed focused on one particular region. Something else was out there. 84 turned to the back of the room, where another door waited for him. He pushed the activator, and entered, already preparing for what was about to start.

Doctor Shingen Mato stood up from his terminal. His eyes ached and burned from the long hours of staring at foreign scripts and language tags. This was getting old. He would have stopped and given up, if he wasn't so close to figuring out what it was they had here. The scientist turned back to the table sitting in the middle of the room. There were three other terminals, and a heads up display hologrammed onto a back wall. The far wall on the opposite side bore a huge window, looking out onto the valley currently covered in discarded canisters, fuel tanks, ammo casings, and warthogs. So many marines, he thought, what is it that we've found here?

The sound of the door closing brought Shingen out of his revelry. The Spartan came in and looked around. He was carrying a rocket launcher

on his left shoulder and a shotgun in his right hand.

"Um, is there another party I didn't know about?" Shingen asked sarcastically, motioning to the weapons.

"No, just a bad feeling." The Spartan always replied in short phrases. Others found it annoying, but to Shingen, it was just cool.

Shingen was a small Asian man, roughly 5 feet 6 inches. He had a wiry frame, and was strong despite his lack of bulging muscles. That's what 15 years of martial arts will do though, and Shingen had been training since childhood. He had entered school not knowing what he was going to do, and had never imagined he would be a research engineer in astrophysics for the UNSC. He was good looking, with small glasses and a trimmed face. Dark intense eyes dominated his face, and he had a tendency to stare.

"That anomaly still bugging you 84?" Shingen asked, talking about the sensor shadows they had been experiencing for almost a month now.

"I know they are here." 84 said coolly.

"Sure, well, then why don't you escort me for a while. I know you like to see what I'm doing."

"You mean, I like to see why we are all here," replied the Spartan. That made sense, though, as Shingen was the head scientist now that the navy had control of this installation. If 84 wanted to know why they were here, it was going to be through Shingen.

"I have some new data fragments to take to the language lab. These symbols just don't have anything to compile them against each other. It's really frustratingâ€¦" Shingen motioned to a pile of data crystal chips, probably worth more than a pair of Scorpion class battle tanks.

In reply to 84's quizzical look, at least, as quizzical as one can get while wearing a fully enclosed helmet, Shingen decided to explain his dilemma.

"You see here Black? These symbols? Well, we have an idea of what the device does, based on a compilation of data logs we found stored in this thing. It records every use, and exactly where it was used, and to where it was aimed. We have here the keystone of teleportation technology. The range, judging by the farthest recorded use, is astronomical. Something close to 25,000 AU (astronomical units)go, which is a very long way. The problem is that the records are recorded in numeric code, which is easy to translate once you understand their number system. It's a 7-based system, using multiples of 7 like we use multiples of 10. I've never heard of such a system, but we have encountered systems of 8 and 12 before, so it's not impossible. So, anyway, you see here? The instructions and the rest of the system files for this thing are all in this other language, similar to what we've found on some of the Covenant buildings and artifacts. It's an iconographic language, with what we estimate to be over 3000 unique characters. I don't think this thing's makers had an alphabet, and if they did, we haven't been able to decipher it. So far, none of the symbols have had enough correlation to give us any idea as to their meaning. I'm

cross-referencing with all the data we have on Covenant writing, but that too is shaky. It's nothing like their command script we've encountered, or the stuff they employ on their computers. It's some kind of holy script they use occasionally to name things. That means this might take us a lot longer than anticipated. I just hope we can get enough of this stuff out of the ground to do some serious research back home. I hate doing it in these cramped little buildings. Especially so close to the ammo of that huge cannon you guys lugged over here." Shingen finished his speech, looking up to see what 84 thought. The Spartan didn't seem to be paying attention to Shingen though, and was instead staring out the window.

"What's wrong 84? I bore you to sleep?" Shingen said with a nervous laugh. Anything that made a Spartan freeze up like that was enough to give Shingen the creeps.

"I saw something, out by the listening post." 84 replied in a serious, monotone voice. Shingen felt the hair on the back of his neck rise up, and looked around the room nervously, trying to think of something to do. He looked back up, and walked over to the window.

"I don't see anything sir, maybe your eyes are just playing tricks on you in the dark. I could turn on the compound lights if you want?" Shingen sounded nervous. He was trying to hide it, but these field operations always made him slightly paranoid. There were too many things that could go wrong.

As the two gazed out at the compound, with its small glow rods spread out, and blinking lights on the listening tower, everything seemed ok. There were much stronger floodlights that Shingen could activate from here, but when he tried, the Spartan stayed his hand.

"If something's here, we don't want to let it know that we have spotted it."

"Who's it? What are you talking about, I don't see anything?" Shingen was desperately trying to see something, anything, out in the gloomy night. His hands pressed to the thick glass, he didn't even notice as 84 walked over and pressed the close button. Noticing at last, Shingen stepped away from the window, and its thick blast door slid into place, obscuring the rest of the compound from view.

"Let's move. We need to protect this building." The Spartan was halfway to the door by the time Shingen turned around.

"Uh, shouldn't we alert the marines? That is why they are here, isn't it? To protect us?"

The Spartan stopped, waiting with his back to the scientist. His voice was cold, and serious.

"We aren't here to protect you. We're here to keep the Covenant from getting your new toy. It's coming with me, as are you." Shingen stood there for a moment, then he grabbed the cross-shaped icon off the table, and walked out the door with Black Angle, determined to meet whatever was coming.

Telys Menee waited quietly while his brothers prepared. He had been sitting and waiting for two weeks now, and was growing very agitated.

He could smell the blood of these humans, and he could not spill it. Looking out from behind the rocks he was hiding behind, Telys watched as the other Phalanxes swept into the compound, silencing guards, and planting plasma bombs. They had seen three large vehicles; similar in size to the wraiths, and 8 or 9 of the smaller wheeled ones. This was to be expected. It was only misfortune that they would have to wait until the Phantom drop ships could land for their own sacred craft. As he watched, he saw the fast flash of a light amplifier farther up the mountain. Good, the snipers were ready. The fuel rod guns that had been hefted up those mountains would soon come in handy when the Infidels piled out of their huts. Telys looked forward to the coming slaughter; it was what these vile blasphemers deserved.

4. Trialsch4

The Spartan burst into the armored room quickly, searching. This was what the Doctor had so humbly referred to as the 'language lab'. It was also the housing room for the computer centers, as well as the main targeting equipment. He was here for something else though.

"Here Doctor, put this on. Then take this, and follow me." Spartan 84 was all business now, determined that they were under attack. Shingen had tried contacting the listening post, and they had failed to respond. So, Shingen tried the anti-aircraft turrets, again with no response. He tried anyone he could think of that was outside, and no response whatsoever. Now he was here, trying to grab the AI and lock down the main terminals, as well as pick up a few things. Looking around, Shingen barely caught the armored vest and helmet that the Spartan tossed him. Looking over at 84, Shingen watched as he put a battle rifle on the nearest table, giving Shingen a nod. Shingen wasted no time in throwing on the gear, and checking the ammo and safety of the rifle. He knew how to use it, was trained in using it. He just hadn't ever fired it at something that wasn't a dummy target.

The Spartan glanced around, and tapped a monitor to life.

"Hello Lieutenant Commander Tyler-84, what may I do for you?" The AI's voice was honey sweet, but he knew that she was capable of anything he needed.

"We're under attack Lady Winter, I need you in me. We have to hurry." After letting her know, 84 reached down and pulled the crystal chip from its socket interface, and inserted it into his helmet.

"Time to go, Doc. Stay close." The Spartan turned and went out the door. He turned to the right, went down the corridor, past many other doors labeled with different functions, until he found the one he was looking for. The door read 'Combat Room'. A little plain for the Spartan's taste, but it did what it needed to do. Opening the door, 84 startled the marine on guard, who was obviously not expecting company. Either of them. The two marines stumbled to their feet, trying not to be too embarrassed for being caught at the act, and finished getting dressed.

"Report." The Spartans voice was like a cold knife.

"Private Allen Moor, sir."

"Private Kelly Rhyder, sir."

"Things are about to get real nasty. I need this gun up and running, understood?" 84 turned on his heels, and continued down the corridor. He could hear machinery coming to life all around him. That meant that half the compounds electricity would be rerouted into this building to fulfill the enormous requirements of the MAC gun. If the flickering lights don't alarm the partying marines, he was sure the first rocket would.

The Spartan turned the corner, and walked into a large room. This one was strewn with bits and pieces. All the samples they had recovered from the caverns below were here, labeled and lain out. This was also the room right above the MAC guns ammo. Not that it would be an issue, the MAC gun didn't fire anything but giant balls of metal and rock. The reason the Spartan was here was because this was the only room with an exterior exit in the entire building. If they were here, which they were, they would be coming in through there. 84 dropped to one knee, and slid up beside a table that displayed a large chunk of stone covered in glyphs. He propped the rocket launcher up onto his shoulder, and looked through the sight. He placed the shotgun on the table, so he could use both hands to steady the massive rocket launcher. Shingen came up directly across from him behind another table, laying his rifle on the table, and pressing his eye to the scope. No more time left, they were coming.

Telys saw the explosions from behind his perch. He laughed, a deep wort, wort, wort. As he did so, he activated his active camouflage, gathered his two plasma rifles, and ran out from behind cover. Telys Menee was going to meet the enemy face on, the way it should be done. The loud footsteps behind him let him know that his unit was close behind. He didn't bother to look; he wouldn't be able to see them.

The door flew into the room from the force of the plasma grenades. Even before he saw anything moving in, Black Angle was already firing into the breach. He heard a gurgling scream, reloaded, and fired again.

Lok ducked as an explosion sent debris and pieces of Shir across his back and energy shield. Something inside had fired a rocket, and he wasn't going to let it get another chance. Lok dashed into the room, followed by Miyn and Fausla, and dove behind cover. The second rocket hit close to where the first rocket went off, sending Miyn sprawling out from behind cover. He landed in a heap, pulling himself across the floor behind some refuse. The lights were dim, but the flash of blue plasma, and green beams brightened the room. Lok saw that there were two of them, and heard his brother Mort shout a battle cry. Turning to his left, he saw Mort leap over the tables, sending chairs flying, the blue and green flashes reflecting off his azure armor. Mort roared in outrage, and raced across the room, trying to bide time for his compatriots. Lok took the opportunity to race across the room, jumping over scattered bits of rock, and knocked over chairs to get behind some cover. His shield hissed at him, deflecting small pieces of stone off away from his body, and occasionally a stray bullet. He looked up from his new position. Good, I'm behind the enemy. Arch prepared to charge.

They came through the hole so fast that 84 could barely track them.

He got two with his rocket launcher, including the damn red one. It wasn't dead, but looked like he wouldn't be having any more trouble from it. Dropping the rocket launcher, he reached over and grabbed his shotgun. Shingen was doing a fine job pinning down the other blue ones, but they outnumbered the two of them 3 to 1. Glancing up, Black Angle saw one of the blues leap onto a table, bellowing, and lunge at him. He stepped out in front of the beast, kicked it in the stomach, spun with the impact, and kicked the creature's weapon from its hands. On the return, he dropped to one knee, and pressed the barrel of his gun up under the creature's chin, where an opening laid between its mandibles and its mouth. The blast sprayed the creature's head against the inside of its helmet. The beast slumped to the floor, as 84 rolled behind another table, 10 feet farther forward than his previous position. Glancing up, he saw Shingen take down another one of the blues. This wasn't right; they were going down too easy. Why were they so desperate to get past us? The Spartan tried to figure out the motives behind the hasty actions of the elites, and failed to notice that one had slipped behind.

Lok crept forward. He knew that if he were to move slowly, the Infidel's motion detectors would not perceive his presence. Sliding over debris, and scattered stone he slipped even closer. He could hear the white coated human breathing, hard rasping and panting.

_Just a little closer. _

The filthy thing must have heard him, because it stopped firing at Lok's brothers, and turned around. It was looking down though, and not at Lok, reloading its primitive weapon. Lok moved swiftly, covering the remaining gap in a series of bounds and landing not a breath from the human. The little man looked up at the last moment, terror distorting his face. Lok did not care. He swiped the man thing's weapon from his hand, and struck it across the face with the butt of his carbine. It fell to the ground, unmoving. Stepping over the body, Lok moved to face the demon. He was not afraid.

Black Angle turned around just in time to see another blue elite bound out of the darkness and knock Shingen against the table he was hiding behind. The young ONI scientist's body bounced against the hard surface, then fell to the ground with a thud. _Damn it_, 84 thought, _now I have to baby-sit, too_. He leapt out from behind his cover, ignoring the green energy beams coming from the elites, and body checked the new comer hard in the chest. It staggered from the impact, then growled and struck back. Black felt like he had been hit by a warthog, as he staggered backwards. _Well_, thought the Spartan, _only one thing to do when it all goes bad_. He reached onto his belt where his remaining grenades rested, and pulled one from his belt. He shot the elite in front of him with his shotgun, and then struck it across the face. It grunted and fell aside. No need to waste ammo, 84 thought objectively. He tossed the frag grenade behind himself at the elite's comrades, as he bent down, scooping up the little scientist's body. It's time to go.

Lok got back to his feet, blood trickling down his face. His shields had saved his life. He turned and looked to see where the Infidels had run to, but decided to let them go. There would be many of his battle brothers here tonight, no need to race off blindly after a few stragglers. Lok looked for his comrades, as the four other survivors moved quietly out from behind cover. His uncle lay strewn on the

ground, breathing shallowly. Walking over to him, Lok bent over his broken form. Glancing over the older Sangheili's body, it was clear that he would not survive. Lok broke off one of the healing rods. It would not close all of Miyn's wounds, but it would make his end swift and painless.

"I will return for you soon, brother, do not lose faith." Lok whispered into his blood brother's ear. He would come back.

With a word, the five Sangheili moved. They ran through the chamber, and down through the door. Looking around, they searched for the grav chute. Since one did not exist, they took the stairs. On the top level, they stopped. They needed to damage the Infidel's weapon enough to keep it from firing. That meant destroying some of its housing. The higher up they went, the less armor around its barrel, and the easier it would be to damage.

Fausla opened the door tentatively. On the other side, he saw a number of blasphemers running past, heading towards their primitive lifts. They were probably heading down to the armory to aid their brethren. Fausla's blood froze when he heard a number of them stop and head for the stairs.

"They come, brothers. Prepare yourselves."

The door swung open, and the Sangheili sprang into action. The first human didn't even get a chance to scream as his face was burned into a black mess of charred flesh. His companions used the time they had wisely. Spreading out, the humans prepared. A blue plasma grenade landed amidst their number, scattering them down the hall and into the adjacent rooms. As it exploded, Lok and his brothers moved in. There were nine more marines, the two nearest lay writhing on the ground, their insides liquefied by the heat of the grenade. Faulsa struck another across the face, the sound of its neck snapping echoing down the small corridor. Lok jumped on another, the two falling onto the ground and rolling about, each trying to gain the upper hand. The remaining humans opened fire. They had a mix of rapid firing SMG's and battle rifles, tearing one of the Sangheili's body's apart. Lok crushed the skull of the human he was on, and rose to face the others. Their leader fired a shotgun into Faulsa, who rocked with the tremendous blow. The ugly man thing snarled and laughed as he stepped forward to finish off the Sangheili. Lok fired into one of the Infidels and lunged at the arrogant human. The man turned and fired at Lok, discharging his shields, but Lok got the moment he needed. With a cry of fury, he drove the back of his weapon up under the human's head in a wicked uppercut that sent it flying. The human twitched idly when it landed. Fausla regained his balance, and fired his plasma rifle into the other gathered humans. Oslo Telmee picked up his fallen brother's discarded plasma rifle and opened up with both. The humans screamed, and burned, leaving the scent of charred flesh and feces, as their bowels gave way under death's wringing hands.

Looking around, all the Sangheili waited, breathing hard. Not one remained without an injury, and they had to pause to allow all of their shields to replenish. Hearing footsteps and human yelling, the four Sangheili met eyes, and sped off in the other direction, anxious to finish their quest.

5. Trialsch5

Spartan 84 reached the barracks in time to witness the horrid trap that had been sprung. Marines everywhere were yelling and thrashing to get at equipment and weapons, while elites moved around the edges, throwing grenades and firing into the mess. The pitch darkness didn't help one bit, either. Thank you night vision, 84 thought to himself as he exited the corridor, carrying the scientist and the icon in his left arm. His right hand held the shotgun. He followed the bellowing sound of Colonel Andrew Mush and UNSC battle rifles.

The Colonel crouched, surrounded by scared privates, and yelled again, "Grab whatever you can find and follow me! We have to get to the armory and get those tanks out! C'mon! This way you flabby butted mongrels!" As he spoke, the Colonel rose to his feet and ran across the room. To his surprise, he made it to the other side. The Colonel could barely see his feet, let alone anything in front of him in this darkness. Damn Covenant, attacking right when things were starting to look good. The sound of footsteps behind him reminded him of what needed to be done. "This way boys and girls! Don't forget the buddy system, you babies!" The Colonel knew that he was making himself a target, but in this darkness, the men needed to hear him in order to follow him. He slid over to the nearest exit, and fumbled with the pad. Accessing emergency lights, and quick release, the entire room was thrown into a pale red glow. Andrew took one last look around at the carnage before ducking out.

Telys was proud of himself. His ivory white armor glistened in the new red glow. His twin plasma rifles never ceased to bark out their blue death as Infidels screamed and ran in every direction. _Well, I no longer have the cover of darkness, but I still have every other advantage._ The 30 or so Elites had slipped into the kitchen, and silently killed the cooks. Their bodies were left behind as the group spread out and moved into the large mess hall. His other phalanx had gone to sabotage main power to the blasphemous structure, while his seventh Phalanx had the unfortunate job of damaging the giant cannon the Infidels had brought. That left 5 Phalanxes for Telys to use, 35 Sangheili, against nearly 400 unarmed, unarmored, intoxicated Infidels. It was magnificent! The screaming had started right away, followed by the smells. Telys always liked the smells best of all; he could taste their agony in his mouth. It tasted like victory. Stepping over another mangled form, Telys commanded his Sangheili to continue firing until their weapons were depleted. They had brought two sets each. He expected to be using a lot of ammo. As the humans regrouped themselves and began to fire back, Telys commanded his warriors to seek cover. The Infidels could still barely see his warriors in the dim light, and they were firing at shadows and muzzle flashes.

"Cease fire! We shall crush the Infidels with our hands!" Activating his camouflage, Telys readied himself for glory.

84 saw the elites spread out, and saw a number of them become invisible. _Great, 400 marines and they couldn't stop a few handfuls of elites_. _This was going to be a long night indeed_. He heard the Colonel's voice again, and rushed towards it. Time to get things organized.

Lok looked around. The maintenance room lacked all of the sacred seals that would be present in a Covenant installation, and was

obviously not blessed, or purified. _Such sloppy filth, these human's things_, thought Lok derisively. He turned back to his colleagues. Nodding to Oslo and Mort, Lok moved to the doorway. He waited. They would come. Fausla moved up beside him. The two of them would bide time with their lives while their comrades set the bombs.

Oslo and Mort climbed up the ladder, and through the hatch, onto the top of the structure. They stood on a wide flat rooftop, with a massive barrel rising far above their heads. Quickly, Oslo clamped the charges to the barrel, and Mort set them. There were 4 plasma charges, set to melt the massive barrel into slag.

"84, yer here! About damn time. Everything's gone to hell, and we need to bring it back." The Colonel wasn't mad, he was pissed.

"Get out there, and get my men out. I'll see who we have here. We need to take back the armory and our heavy equipment. Now move!" The Colonel turned, motioned for the surrounding infantry to follow him, and raced off down the corridor.

Spartan 84 looked back out over the hall. Bodies of men and women rested everywhere, their forms contorted in the throes of death. The smells of burning flesh and body fluids filled the air. A number of marines stood their ground near him, at the far end of the room. They crouched behind anything they could find, and fired at ghosts and shadows. Spartan 84 looked down at his shotgun, and then at the body strung over his shoulder. He wasn't staying here. Taking one last look at the brave men and women remaining behind, Black Angle left the hall, on his way to the landing pad. This night was not going to end well.

Telys moved with haste over the fallen bodies of Infidels. They had killed more than he had imagined in the brief minutes of the attack. With so many dead, he wondered if there would be enough left for a battle. _It would be a pity if this operation became a clean up._ His thought was cut short as he reached the human line. They were spread out, making themselves harder to kill with grenades. Ducked behind cover, the fools were trying desperately to hit anything in the dim light. He would enjoy crushing the life out of these blasphemous animals. With a bellowing war cry, Telys leapt into the melee, his brothers echoing with their own voices, the sounds rising into the night, followed only by the screams of the dying.

Mort and Oslo jumped down the hatch, into a firestorm. Two large groups of Infidels had discovered their holy Phalanx, and had moved to intercept. Fausla and Lok were pressed to the sides of the doorway, gunfire streaking across it from a dozen different weapons. They had to move soon, this room wouldn't be here after those charges went off. Lok conveyed his understanding with a somber look. If they didn't make it, so be it. They had accomplished their task.

The last human in the great hall died, its throat wrenched by Telys's vice grip. He looked up at his brothers. With only a single Phalanx worth of casualties, leaving him nearly 27 Sangheili, it had gone perfectly. He now had two options, chase the remaining Infidels, or prepare the way for the rest of his forces. Honor made his decision for him, and he turned, signaling for his brothers to follow. They would make sure the large guns of the sinners remained silent as the divine host came down from the heavens. This world would be theirs by sunrise. This world would be his.

Colonel Mush reached the armory. He had expected a larger force of covenant here, and so he had opted to waste precious time for his troops to gather all their equipment and organize into their platoons. With 60 troops to a platoon, that meant he had 4 full platoons, and 20 stragglers, a total of 260 infantry. Out of 420 starting people, that wasn't as many as he was hoping for, but it would do. There was no time for grief or mourning now. There was only time to do or die, and he hadn't planned on dieing tonight.

He assigned A platoon with getting the pelicans ready to fly. Someone was getting off this rock alive. He had sent B platoon to make sure the MAC gun was ready to fire. If they didn't keep that baby alive, the enemy could park a cruiser right over their heads and drop whatever they wanted onto this place. On that thought, Andrew wondered what happened to the cruiser that was supposed to be watching over them. It didn't matter now, what mattered was that his people were dying, and he needed to stop that.

They stood in front of the entrance door to the vehicle garage. It was a massive steel wall that lifted only with the help of machinery. He hit the button, the door opening with a hiss, and 20 marines dashed under it before it was even halfway up. They were armed with SMG's, in case they encountered the enemy at close range. Colonel mush checked his shotgun, making sure it was fully loaded. Things might get ugly. As C platoon spread out into 6 ten-man squads, Andrew took a moment to look over D platoon, still standing around him. The uniforms weren't right. He had had to break up three or four platoons and make them into one or two, and move the rest into the other platoons to fill in gaps. There were so many casualties. Now, all of his platoons, except for A platoon, were made up of a mishmash of all of the platoons' troops, scrabbled together last minute and field promoted into units. Sergeant Sean Messin returned from where C platoon had started to gather.

"Sir, no sign of the enemy. There's no one here sir but us monkeys."

"Good, sergeant. Set up a communications center here. We'll make this our field HQ. I'll have D platoon make sure the vehicles still work. Now go." The Colonel turned to D platoon. They looked tired and scared. These were marines for God's sake. "D platoon, move down there and open all these garages. We need to make sure mankind's wonderful works are still jumpin' and kickin'. That, and I really want a tank right now to blow those Covvie assholes all the way back home. Now get going!" The Colonel watched D platoon leave, and hoped B platoon was having as good of luck as his people were.

Sergeant Major Bolfoot was exhausted, and worried. So was B platoon. They had gathered weapons and armor, and hauled it all the way up to this stupid gun, only to find a lot of dead technicians, and some elites settling down for a party. There couldn't be more than a few of them in there, but he was having a hell of a time getting them out. He couldn't use any grenades or rockets, not with all the sensitive equipment nearby. If he did, he might damage the computers, accidentally setting off the MAC guns fail safes, and then it would refuse to fire. _Stupid technology, the more complicated and advanced it got, the easier it was to break._ He remembered back when he joined the marines, and all they got were a stick and a rock. He had had to share the rock with the smelly guy. One of the squad sergeants

pulled him from his thoughts.

"Uh, sir? There are definitely a crap load of those Covvie bastards coming up from behind us. Our only way out is blocked. What do are we gonna do?" The young man had been field promoted, too many dead officers and all that.

"Ok, grab one of the 50 Cal's and move it to those stairs. That should hold them at bay for a while. Take 2nd squad with you. That gives you twenty boys, and some backup. I need you to hold them." He gave the young marine a reassuring pat on the shoulder, knowing that this man was going to die, "Don't worry, soldier, we'll make it out of this alive, I promise you." Dead men love promises. He just wished he could keep more of them. He watched the little soldier run back to the rear, and guessed that those twenty men would survive another half an hour before they were over run. It takes almost four men to take down an elite, and he didn't have those kinds of numbers. Where the hell was their backup? _Chimera_ was supposed to be sending help, but he hadn't seen any.

A. Munez, now captain of the UNSC cruiser _Chimera_, glanced down at her tact display. _Damn it_, she thought, _another level taken by the enemy_. They had been attacked nearly 7 hours ago, and it had been all down hill from there. The enemy cruiser had probably hid in the nearby moon's shadow for days, before using a slipspace jump to arrive within firing range of them. Half the crew had still been asleep, and the actual Captain hadn't even made it out of his room before he died. She wasn't even the first officer; he had died when the first of the Covenant came aboard. She was the tactical officer, and the only one of these 'men' with enough balls to sit in this chair, and now she was starting to see why. They hadn't fired even half their weapons before they went offline. The enemy ship shot salvo after salvo of light weapons, obviously trying to do nothing more than clear every turret and weapon off of the hull of her ship. The MAC gun fired once, but didn't get a good hit. It disintegrated part of the enemy ship, but missed anything important. She didn't blame the man in weapons control; his nerves were probably as fried as hers. The ship had been hit by six or seven boarding craft, which, to their dismay, spilled out black and gold elites. It seemed the Covenant ship captain had decided to lead the charge itself, which would have been a perfect opportunity to kill it, if the creatures hadn't wiped out half her ship's crew and every marine onboard in half an hour. Things weren't looking good, and she only hoped that things on the ground were fairing better than the nightmare she was experiencing.

The Sergeant watched as one of his men caught a plasma bolt to the face. He went down, dead before he could scream. It was time to move.

"C'mon boys! Do you want to live forever?!" Jumping to his feet, the Sergeant led a running charge into the remaining elites guarding the MAC gun's access room. He ran down the hallway, watching another of his men fall, and leaped over the rolling body. Plasma arched past him, hissing and burning in his ears. His shotgun spoke death, and one of the elites collapsed, its arms flopping about as its body twitched. One of his men jumped over the body, only to be struck in the face with a mighty blow from another elite, knocking the man off his feet. Sergeant Bolfoot brought his gun up and fired it into the new elite, taking down his shields. A quick strike to the head sent

the elite tumbling to his feet. Ducking and spinning, he pumped the shotgun to kill the remaining bastards, only to be flung back by a blow to his chest. The creature had been waiting for him to face it, giving it a clear shot. Bolfoot's head was spinning, but he soon realized that he had only lost his wind, not his life. Rolling to his feet, he scanned the small room that the elites had held up in. On the far wall was the terminal that had saved the monsters' lives from explosives, a simple targeting matrix. Directly to his left, moving from behind some spare parts was another of the beasts, hefting two plasma rifles in its big hands. In front of him stood the one that had struck him, standing on his shotgun, holding one of those purple rifles leveled at him. He could hear the screaming of his men outside in the corridors, and wished he were there, able to face down the enemy with them. Instead he was standing in front of one, waiting for it to finish him. It didn't though, and he thought that maybe it would show mercy, until he saw the spark in its eyes. It didn't want to shoot him, what fun was in that?

Lok looked the man thing right in the face. This one he could respect. It had rushed down the corridor, through the fire of both Mort and Oslo, blasted Mort's insides out onto the floor and then struck Oslo square in the face, breaking his neck; two Sangheili dead in just as many breaths. That was not a feat of just a filthy animal. This was a warrior that stood before him.

Lok lowered his carbine, and stepped onto the little creature's weapon. He could kill the Infidel with a gentle squeeze of the trigger, but that would be a dishonorable death, a meaningless death. This Infidel deserved better. Lok tossed his carbine aside, knowing that Fausla would keep an eye on the doorway, and prepared to leap on the human. Hand to hand, the way the gods had fought each other.

Sergeant Major Brandon Bolfoot was no small man. Standing at a strong six foot six inches, no one fucked with him. The elite that jumped at him was nearly eight and a half feet tall, much bigger than any man Bolfoot had fought before. The two rolled across the ground, trying to grab a hold of a limb, throat, or genitals. Bolfoot reached down to his boot, and slipped out his eight-inch combat knife. Grabbing the elites throat with his fingers, he closed its windpipe, and thrust the knife into its side. The blade dug deep into its side, under its thick chest armor. Nearly half of the blade disappeared into the creatures flesh.

"Take that you slimy bastard!" Sergeant major Brandon Bolfoot was going to kill this monster, and he knew it. The beast pulled itself off of him, and staggered back, groping for the knife handle sticking out of its side. Brandon jumped to his feet and charged it, trying to knock it from its feet, using his fourteen years of wrestling and unarmed combat training to his advantage, again.

Holding onto the man thing was like trying to hold onto a chukka snake covered in blood, thought Lok. He was wiggling on the ground, trying to get a hold of the Infidel, but every time he grabbed it, it would move and slip out, or push his arm and force him to release. The little creature knew how to win, and it was planning on it. A cold fire shot through Lok's body as the human plunged a concealed knife into his side. Lok hadn't even seen him draw the weapon. Pushing the man away, Lok staggered back. His mind was getting foggy and rolling over itself, but he wasn't dead yet. The human leapt to

its feet, and charged him. Stepping to the side and turning his body, Lok grabbed a hold of the human's arm, throwing him into the metal wall. It bounced off the wall, and regained its balanced, swaying slightly from the impact. Settling back, the man prepared for Lok's charge, but it didn't come. Instead, Lok dashed forward and kicked the man's legs out from under him. By the way the man stood, Lok doubted it would have worked if he had the strength of only a man, but he was Sangheili, gifted with the strength of gods. The man flipped onto his face, crying out in surprise.

The creature's strength was amazing. Bolfoot had never experienced a creature so strong and fast. He hadn't ever fought an elite in hand-to-hand either. He lay there, staring at the floor, trying to catch up with what had happened. He knew if he didn't move soon the elite would crush his spine, or smash his ribs, so he rolled to the side and sprang to his feet. Staggering from a hot pain that shot through his leg, he reset himself, confident that he wouldn't be caught that way again. _The Elite's been stabbed, I haven't, I can outlast him_, thought the sergeant, _just gotta make sure he doesn't get a hold of me_. To his surprise, the elite had waited for him to get up. It looked like it was starting to stagger from the knife wound, and Sergeant Bolfoot prepared himself to charge.

Lok's vision began to get fuzzy, but the human was still alive. It lunged at him, and he turned sideways and lunged back. 400 pounds of muscle and metal met 250 pounds of muscle, and something shattered. Lok took a step back as the human crumpled to the ground. Arch had led with his shoulder armor, and weighed nearly twice as much as the human in pure muscle mass. The human's left arm looked broken, and the human slowly got back to his feet. _How much more can this man thing take?_ thought Lok, _because I can't keep this up much longer._

His arm broken, and his shoulder dislocated, Brandon stumbled back to his feet. He was going to die like a man. His vision fuzzy from his concussion, pain burning his left arm and leg, Sergeant Bolfoot stumbled forward. The creature saw him, and moved with such speed that Bolfoot's injured mind couldn't keep up. The impact to his head sent him staggering, the world spinning. He looked up into the ugly face of the elite, wishing he were somewhere else, before the world closed in on him.

The Infidel was down. The last strike to the creature's head had brought it to the ground. If it hadn't been wearing a helmet, Lok was sure he would have broken its head open. As it were, he couldn't feel his left hand, having broken his lower thumb and both his fingers in the strike. Glancing down at himself, he realized how horribly injured he was. The world was getting dark.

Fausla stepped forward to hold his dear friend up. The two of them were the only survivors of the Phalanx. Glancing at the downed Infidel, Fausla whispered to his brother.

"We must move, or else we shall join the Great Journey early, and fail to see another glorious quest. It still lives, brother, and I will do with its life as you wish. We haven't much time, though, so I suggest you make your decision before the darkness of your wounds takes your mind."

"Brother, bring it with us. I want to speak to it before we kill

it."

"As you wish, brother." Fausla bent down, and hefted the human onto his other shoulder, taking Lok's body onto his remaining. Stepping out of the room, he saw the rest of the Infidels scattered about, posed in their final moments of life. The Field Master strode over the bodies towards him.

"Brother, you have done as was instructed?"

"Yes, Lord Commander. The weapon of the Infidels shall bark death no more. Our ships have nothing to fear. We must move from here, however, as its death throes will devastate this entire area."

"Of course, brother. Is that your comrade?"

"Yes, Lord Commander."

"And the other?"

"A trophy, my lord."

"I see. Very well. Hurry. My Phalanx will direct you to the hallowed ground where you may await recovery."

"Thank you, Lord Commander. Honor and glory in your name." Fausla took the body of his brother and the body of the unconscious marine down the hall, past the other Sangheili warriors, who spat on the marine as he passed. He went down the stairs and walked out into the damp night air. It was a good night. Soon, this area would be swarming with the multitude of the Covenant. Soon, all traces of infectious impurity will be cleansed. Fausla felt good. His task was complete.

The doors opened, and the tanks rolled out. Colonel Andrew Mush saluted them as they left, followed by 8 fully loaded warthogs, 5 with machine guns, and 3 with gauss cannons. He would retake this valley, damn it, and hold it until help arrived. After the second tank rolled out of its garage, Colonel Andrew Mush started feeling better. He might win this after all.

The MAC cannon melted in a flash of brilliant blue light. He changed his mind. This was going to be the night from hell.

Captain Munez looked down in horror at her systems display. The entire display was slowly turning red. She could hear gunfire just beyond the blast door at the rear of the bridge. The crew who had volunteered to hold the Covenant at bay were buying her as much time as they could. She didn't know what she was supposed to do. A ship this small didn't carry an AI, and the codes for self destruction died with the three ranking officers. The entire back half of the ship was full of covenant. The only thing she could do was her duty, and that she would not neglect.

"Helm, set a course for the planet."

"Captain, we aren't equipped for a planet side entry. Not anymore. All of our subsystems are offline; we would fall like a rock!" Helm wasn't too pleased about a suicide course into the planet.

"Helm, set the course. We haven't much time left to live. Please, we need to do something, and we can't let the Covenant walk out without a price."

"Aye sir. Course set." Captain Munez felt the ship shudder as its backup thrusters pushed it into a new heading. She only hoped that the Covenant hadn't disabled everything. When the ship failed to reach its new speed and heading, she knew that it was too late. The Covenant had disabled the main engines, and turned off main power. She couldn't move the ship, she couldn't fire the weapons, she couldn't self-destruct, and she couldn't stop them from getting into the bridge. The battle was over. They had lost, and they would all soon die.

"Everyone, close down your stations. Pull out the emergency arms. We will make a last stand before we die." The empty eyes of the bridge crew met hers. They knew they had no choice. They would have to fight through the Covenant to get to the escape pods, and judging by the silence that came over the ship, there were still a lot of them left, and no one left to help.

Helm broke out the SMG's and armored vests, the Captain taking the magnum and one of the grenades. With any luck, they would be able to take out some of them before they lost their lives. As they spread out, looking for cover, Captain Munez did a computer memory wipe, and shot all the terminals. They were going to lose the ship, but the Covenant wasn't going to learn anything from her systems. Earth was still safe. She wished she were there now.

Major Adam Kistler reached the underground landing pad. There lay the four pelicans that weren't in the cruiser. They were untouched.

"Ok men, spread out. I want everyone in pairs, and each pair to have a SMG and a pair of grenades, so pass out your extras. C'mon people, lets make this happen!" Adam Kistler was no push over. Adam was a young officer, about 26 years old. He had dark brown hair, and tanned skin, too many jobs on sunny worlds. His body wasn't built, but he had enough muscle to take care of himself. His men respected him, but he had to be careful. He definitely didn't have the experience of some of the older commanding officers. He had the tendency, though, to make up for experience with sheer luck. It was what he blamed for his military success and promotion, that and an astronomical casualty rate in a losing war. He was in command of the crack Storm Squad, though, and they were the best men and women he had ever served with. They had done space drops, and building assaults, deep recon, and take and hold operations. Anything that a commander could need, they could do. Now, they were needed to guard the one way out of here, and they were not about to break their perfect record. Adam checked his battle rifle and magnum, glanced at his grenades, and walked over to his heavy weapons team. In A platoon there were 6 ten man squads: A headquarters squad, which was his personal squad, 3 tactical squads with battle rifles, and sub machine guns, a special weapons squad broken into two 5 man teams, one with a trio of sniper rifles and two spotters, and one with a trio of rocket launchers, and 1 heavy weapons squad. He considered them to be his Bricks, because he could put them anywhere and rely on them to still be there when he came back. They had three 50 Cal machine guns that needed to be set up, and a mortar team, not that it would be real handy underground. His command squad had him, with a battle rifle and Submachine gun, 3 other battle rifles, 4 shotguns, and a pair of flamethrowers. Real

handy, those, against grunts and jackals, scared the crap outta them too. Every squad's sergeant carried a shotgun, too. There were three ways into the hanger, plus a retractable roof to allow the vehicles access to the exterior. He had just come from the Armory, so that left the mess hall, and MAC building entrances.

"Okay, I want a 50 Cal on each of those entrances, and I need some barricades. That'll be the Tactical boys' responsibility. Then I want a tactical team on each entrance, just in case they try to sneak around behind us. Snipers, hang around the pelicans, just in case something breaks through our lines. Heavy team, move to cover the entrance from the MAC center, I have a feeling that's where they'll be coming from. Haley, can you close those blast doors for me? Thanks." Haley was his tech guy. Ex-ONI, he had a family on one of the planets the Covenant bombed from orbit. After that, he joined up with the marines and was dumped into the Special Forces. Major Kistler thanked God everyday that he had a man as competent as Haley. The guy could do everything.

"When you are done with that, Haley, grab some guys and get these pelicans warmed up. We might have to get out of here in a hurry, and I don't want to be caught with cold birds." The Major turned to watch his men, and checked the grenade launcher on his gun. This was going to be ugly. The elites had to be making things nice and comfy for the rest of the Covenant to come down and have a party, and come they would.

84 walked casually across the garage and watched the tanks rolling out of the base. The loud BOOM! that shook the entire complex, sending panic racing through the marines, didn't surprise him. Who ever was running the show on the other side was going through the battle exactly the way he would have done it himself. Send your main force in to rouse up the local troops, take as many out with surprise as you can while you send another group to take out their stationary defenses, then pull back, fly in support, and over run it. It was typical Covenant strategy. He continued walking. None of these men will survive another day. They would make it through tonight maybe; tomorrow, definitely not. He kept walking, and turned to head to the pelicans. They needed to protect those. At the end of the day, they were going to need a ride out of here, and he wasn't going to let the Covenant keep them grounded.

84 entered the hanger and was met by a shotgun to the face, a black armored marine blocking his way. He waited patiently for the normal calls to come through. All the Storm Squad soldiers looked the same, in their black armor and visored helmets. The commander came forward a few moments later; he had the red and blue stripes on his shoulder of a major.

"Sir, I'm sorry about the unfriendly welcome. Let'em by boys! He's our new Jesus Christ, here to save our souls!" The men let out a cheer as Black Angle took up position near one of the machine guns. Thank god, thought Major Kistler, my men really need the morale boost, and a Spartan is more than I could have asked for. It was time to buckle down for the long wait.

Colonel Mush walked outside. He had only one tank left, and four warthogs. He would need those. The enemy had snipers up on the cliffs, and they had heavy weapons too. He lost two tanks and half his warthogs before he could get all the elites off the cliffs. He

didn't know how many had been up there, and he didn't care. One of the knocked out tanks still had a working turret, and he had it dragged with the warthogs over to the garage. It could use the building for cover. They salvaged a gauss cannon and two of the three machine guns. He was setting those up to replace the destroyed anti-aircraft turrets. The enemy was no where to be found, but they had already melted the massive erect barrel of the MAC gun in half, and had destroyed all of the automated defense turrets, all 16 of them. He had make shift defenses, had the warthogs running recon, and had one operational tank. 200 marines had been spread out over the valley, in their platoons of 50 now, and there was only one last thing to do, wait.

6. Trialsch6

The Covenant did not arrive one at a time, or even a few at a time. They arrived all at once. 8 phantoms and 10 Apparation class transports, with their long fork shaped prows, came in fast. The transports swooped over the mountains, flying low. They dropped from the sky like shooting stars, coming to rest scant feet from the ground in a thick cluster in the middle of the valley. In front of them rode howling death. The Seraphs were fast, sleek, deadly looking craft, shaped like a teardrop with spines. They were the Covenant space superiority fighters, and they dived in raining plasma and fuel rods, while marines ran to and fro. The Seraphs were only trying to keep the marines attention, while the transports disembarked their precious cargo. The tanks shot at the transports anyway, taking down an Apparation and two of the Phantoms, and another Apparation fell to the warthogs, but not before they could drop off their cargo of Ghosts. Grunts spilled like a rainbow flood from the drop ships, spreading in every direction and firing at anything that moved. They covered the valley floor, running in clusters of colored blue midgets. Jackals dropped in sworths, racing for the cover of rocks and boulders that had fallen from the cliffs. 6 pairs of hunters landed, bellowing challenges across the field of battle. The last two Phantoms deposited their wraiths, which were joined by a trio of Spectres. The Wraiths', Covenant tanks, plasma mortars began dropping doom upon the marines' positions, sending the entire valley into chaos. The marines had set up in two positions. The first was in hedgerow trenches set in front of the garage, one of the structures forming a curve along the inset of the valley. That way, they had the other structures to their left, and the mountain pass to their right. The damaged tank covered the pass, and had a pair of warthogs giving the marines entrenched at its entrance covering fire. The other two tanks were set at corners behind the main marine force, so they could shoot over the heads of all the marines. The Scorpion tanks blasted at Wraiths and Ghosts, sending purple chunks flying in pieces through the air. One of the Wraiths exploded in a blue blast of light as it passed through the open valley, while the other moved behind the wall of slagged metal that remained of the MAC cannon. That put it on the flank of the main marine force, exactly opposite from the mountain pass. The Seraphs disintegrated the damaged tank guarding the pass, and all of the salvaged warthogs' weapons. Two of the remaining warthogs tried to flank the large Covenant force, driving a large circle across the open field, only to be sent flying by grunt held fuel rod guns. The two scorpions moved back into cover behind the garage, trying to keep their fragile flanks covered. Marines ran from trench to trench, diving in to the deep cuts in the earth, while trying to keep a hail of fire on the enemy. Grunts fell, and the

night was alive with glowing blood, muzzle flashes, and bolts of blue plasma. A shadow fell over the valley, as the Covenant cruiser came in low. It hovered in the middle of the valley, its curves and hourglass shape illuminated by the battle. The cruiser dropped a single gigantic pod onto the valley floor before drifting back up above the clouds. The egg shaped pod landed with a crash that sent every creature in the valley dashing for cover.

"What in the hell!" Colonel Mush was doing what he could. His forward troops were dead, his flank was falling to Ghosts and Spectres. If his flank fell, the mountain pass would be open, allowing the Covenant to shoot straight down his trenches. The Hunters were keeping his Warthogs and tanks behind cover, and his missile teams couldn't get a healthy lock on much of anything. Worse yet, he was running out of ammo. He bent over the radioman beside him. The poor man was barely 22 years old, and his face was dripping with sweat. He passed the Colonel the head set with shaky hands, watching the Covenant force grow with agitation. They had a large communication system set up, patched into the compounds net, and the Colonel was trying to use it as best he could.

"Tell me you got a hold of them. They have to be there."

"No sir, nothing. I don't think they're there. We're all alone." The radioman had been trying to get a hold of the Chimera for hours, but she continued to remain silent. Something was very wrong.

"Then send out a mayday. We don't have much time left." A tank flying over their trench echoed the Colonel's failing courage. A trio of Hunters, who screamed their victory cry across the battlefield, had hit it. Andrew Mush ducked his head down, listening to the sounds of battle. He looked up and down his trench at the faces of the men and women who served under him. Their eyes all said the same thing, we're not going to live through this. The huge valley had turned into a massive firefight, his trenches on one side, jackals, grunts, and Hunters on the other. Ghosts and Spectres challenged his flank, racing back and forth through the pass, shooting into trenches and vehicles alike, while strafing Banshees, Seraph space fighters, and Phantoms immediately killed anything stupid enough to be seen. Now, there was a huge egg shaped dome in the middle of the entire mess. Whatever the hell it was, Andrew Mush knew it wasn't going to be good.

Kon Hejee looked at his systems. All were ready. He activated the deployment sequence, and signaled for the Unggoy to get on top. His Scarab stretched its legs and stood, the top already filling with Unggoy and their fuel rod guns. This was going to be easy.

Colonel Mush looked up with horror as the massive ovular object broke apart, and a huge Scarab stretched its leg. The machine looked like a giant robot spider, except that it had a big ass laser cannon for a head. On top was a large open platform, currently filled to the brim with grunts carrying shoulder-mounted cannon. Scarabs were tough as hell to take down, and he knew that he didn't have any way up there, or any way to kill it. They were all doomed. How did the Covenant know they were here? The Scarab's head opened like some giant robotic flower, and its center glowed bright blue before firing a beam of super hot plasma at Colonel Mush's last tank. He watched helplessly as the Hunters ran forward and jumped into the trenches in front of him, finishing off his second platoon. He had only a handful of men

left. Every vehicle and every man outside of his trench was dead and destroyed. Night filled the valley, only disturbed by the occasional green or blue blast of plasma, as grunts and jackals finished off the wounded. Their screams echoed through the little valley, making the hair stand up on Andrew's neck. The Colonel turned to his remaining troops.

"Come on men! To the Pelicans! We have to get the hell out of here!" The Colonel obeyed his own orders immediately, crawling out of his trench, and running for the underground entrance to the hanger where the Pelicans waited. Some of them might be able to get out of here yet.

Private Sean Messin stood in his trench with his gun leaning against him. He could feel its cold weight pressed to his side, which usually comforted him, but now it only further reminded him of where he was. Looking out of his trench, he saw grunts covering the valley in front of him, Hunters firing over their short, stocky heads. Sean couldn't believe this was happening. The screams of injured and dying filled his ears, the smells of their blood and fluids invaded his nostrils, his body sweating from nerves and the heat of plasma. Sean ducked low in his trench, wishing everything were different. He dropped his gun, watching it as it fell, feeling helpless and afraid. He didn't have any ammo, and couldn't bring himself to pull any from his dead friends. His weapon was useless, he was useless. The young man next to him still clutched his rifle, his chest a smoldering mess of melted armor, flesh, and steaming organs. Sean knew the man, had known him now. They had been friends. His name had been Anthony, Anthony Tallert, and now he was just another corpse, another part of the field and horror of war. Sean bent over and retched. He was going to die. Looking up, he saw the massive frame of a Hunter step into the trench. It lowered itself into the small passage, and turned to face him. Sean looked up as the creature towered over him, unfolding its arms, while its head twisted to look at him. For a moment, the two creatures eyed one another. Sean could not take his eyes from the massive creature's body, its terrible shape, the blood dripping from its giant metal shield. It studied him, alien thoughts passing through its head, and lifted its shield, stretching out over Sean's body. He looked up at the shield over him, light shining off its razor edges, and tried to scoot away, he tried to get up and run, but he was frozen in place. He was too terrified to move. Then it stepped forward, and Sean saw no more.

Frederick Nichols hated his job, and right now, he hated it more than anything. He huddled behind his table, his hands wrapped around the hot SMG, trying to get another clip into place. He was having the darnest time reloading the thing, mostly because he couldn't stop his hands from shaking. He looked up, and saw Ariel crouched behind a table not ten feet away. She was crying. He saw her reload her battle rifle, and ready a grenade. Ariel tossed it blindly, trying to get the Covenant's heads down, if for only a moment. She ducked out of cover and sprayed a few bursts. Looking behind him, he saw the body of the younger, beautiful scientist he had worked with just yesterday. Her entrails lay strewn out around her body, her face unrecognizable. She had been too close to one of those Covvie grenades, and without any protection, her body had melted and twisted under the heat. He threw up again. It wasn't the sights that got to him, it was the smell. It clung to his nose, and made his eyes water, and his throat dry and scratchy. How could a man do this for his entire life? Once again, he was glad that he wasn't a marine.

The room they were in was big, and circular, with a door at both ends. The one behind him had a giant blast door blocking it, but the one across the room was wide open, molten metal lying in bits around the frame. The little grunt bastards came in through the front with their shoulder cannons, while the Elites had tried to burst in from behind. The Elites had two Hunters with them. Luckily, the thick blast doors were holding those back, which was good, as they had their backs nearly pressed to the doors. The little research station had been chosen for their last defense because of its armor shielding. They used it for radioactive materials testing, making it necessary for thick walls. That kept any heavy weapons from blowing through, but the doors were only held in by steel, which melted after enough plasma hit it. There were originally 14 of them. Now, there were 6, and they weren't fairsing too well. The survivors were spread out through the room, hiding behind tables, desks, workstations, and anything else that could protect them. Frederick finally got the clip into the stupid gun, and ducked out of cover to give another spray. He didn't fire though, as he looked up into the blurred form of an invisible elite. The creature swept its energy blade, and sprayed Frederick's upper body across the floor.

Ariel screamed when Frederick died. The elite had rushed up, and she hadn't noticed its invisible form in the dark. They had destroyed main power hours ago, and the emergency red lights weren't working well enough to see more than ten feet. Ariel gazed in horror as it turned to look at her. She tried to shoot it, but her hands were frozen. She was paralyzed with fear. This isn't happening, she repeated to herself, as the creature walked casually towards her. She didn't see its smile as raised its sword, Bringing it down, and ending Ariel's world.

Telys watched from the human cannon's structure, safe now that the cannon was a mountain of warm metal. He switched through his Sangheili warrior's optical recorders, seeing what they saw, and hearing what they heard. Telys always preferred being amongst the warriors, but tonight he needed to stay back, just in case the Infidels had an ugly surprise hidden away. Looking through the data, he saw something that caught his eye. It was a large circular door in the ground, hidden in the back of the valley, and slightly below level ground. Very clever, thought Telys, hide your escape vector, and make your enemy's prefer to wait you out than finish their duty. He wasn't known for his patience.

"All warriors, prepare for assault. We kill them now, all of them." He was tired of this game of chase.

Jumping down from his elevated position, Telys checked his plasma rifle. He glanced at his Honor Guard, eight jackals and two deep crimson Sangheili warriors. It was time to finish this. Telys began a quick pace to the human launch pad, signaling a pair of Hunter that were trying desperately to smash through a thick set of blast doors, to follow. He would need their strength and fortitude. Awaiting him were twenty other Sangheili warriors, and a multitude of Unggoy, all shaking and jittering from the excitement of battle.

Telys pointed at the spiral shaped door lying just below them in a recess. The Infidels' ships must be hidden there. He was going to find them, and stop them from getting away.

Major Alex Kistler was getting uneasy. He had snipers, shotguns and flamethrowers at two of the three entrances. The third entrance had just been closed permanently with plastic explosives. This was too easy. Only a few of the Covenant wandered too close, getting their heads blown from their shoulders. The Covenant commander was cunning, and he knew that the creature had something in mind. No way had the Pelicans' launch bay gone unnoticed, or the loud sounds of five Pelicans warming up for lift off. A horrendous grinding sound from behind confirmed his thoughts. They were coming in through the Pelicans' exit. This was bad.

The Lokgolo were firing at the human launch bay door. It lay flat on the ground, nearly 80 paces across. The metal glowed bright red. The Lokgolo wasted no time, and began smashing at the hot metal, bending it down, breaking through its reinforced surface. Telys was going to finish his quest, and bring victory to the Covenant.

Colonel Mush walked wearily up to Major Kistler.

"Well, everyone's here. Now we have to decide what to do."

Major Kistler gave him a dumbfounded look, completely lost through his featureless helmet.

"We have Hunters coming in over our heads, and pretty soon—" The sounds of gunfire at the two entrances cut off his sentence. Jackals and grunts were charging the two entrances, trying to get the marines to back into the coming Hunters.

"Huh, well I guess that answered that. We're all dead men, Major, I suggest you start making peace with your god."

Major Kistler didn't like the sound of that. He wasn't about to die on this ugly god forsaken rock. The birds were ready to fly, and by the sounds of it, there were only two hunters. He had five Pelicans. The numbers added up in his head, and he made his decision.

"All the stragglers from B through G platoon, get in the Pelicans! Now!" Alex turned to the Colonel, "That means you too, sir."

"You aren't getting all heroic and shit on me, are you Major? Because you know how we marines feel about heroes? They get too many of their buddies killed when a buncha C-4 woulda done the job just fine."

The Major turned and looked at him. "Sir, no offense, but if we had some damn C-4, we wouldn't be in such dire straights. As it were, I have one machine gun with ammo left, and about three quarters of my platoon left. You have about one platoon worth of stragglers, and most of them are out of ammo. I suggest that you get in that god damned Pelican, before I shoot you and take over. Hear me, sir?"

Colonel Mush looked at the Major. He wished he could see the man's face, but was too smart to ask him to remove his helmet. This man was going to die for them, and was willing to do anything to try and save some of his men in the process.

"Ok Major, good luck. My boys and girls, get in those bloody birds! We've got some flying to do!" The marines ran into the Pelicans, strapping themselves in. Major Alex grabbed Haley, and yelled for him

to pull everyone back. He had one idea left.

"Good luck Colonel, and God's speed!" The Major yelled, and his men opened fire. He had his missile crews firing salvos through the roof launch bay as soon as it opened. Two Hunters stood, waiting for them. The missiles took one out before it could fire back; the other killed his entire heavy weapons team in a single shot. _Damnit_, thought Alex, _I'm in a lot more than I can handle_. He looked over to his left, one of his flamethrowers stood there, looking razzled. An idea formed in his head.

"Ok men, give it one last friendly burst, and then follow me! We've gotta get out of here ourselves!" He turned and grabbed the flamethrower, motioning for him to follow. They still had two exits from here, and a lot of mountain to hide in.

The Colonel's five Pelicans, each carrying 12 people, flew through the opened hole in the ceiling of the underground structure, straining to gain altitude. The first Pelican blew into tiny bits as a trio of fuel rod guns fired into it. The second got some altitude, but the turrets on the Scarab took it apart, sending bits of marine and transport raining down. The third turned, trying to go low over the mountains. It pushed for speed, flying back and forth over the rocky terrain. A pair of Banshees came screaming out of a cave, sending a pair of Banshee bombs into the front of the human transport. It exploded in a ball of light that lit up the night sky. The fourth Pelican out was even less lucky, as the deranged, pissed off Hunter got its bearings, and slammed the Pelican with its massive shield as it passed by. The tail of the Pelican clipped the rim of the bay door, tearing most of it off. The transport spun and crashed, Covenant swarming to it, killing any survivors. Colonel Mush's Pelican flew high and far, reaching the clouds. It broke free, and as it did so, a huge Covenant warship filled its field of vision. The pilot had only enough time to curse before the Covenant cruiser shot the little Pelican with a single Plasma barrage, melting the ship into tiny balls of molten metal. The Colonel was able to make one final transmission before dying, a personal log:

_To any UNSC Ship, _

The planet Terrace has been compromised. The item of value is in the hands of a Spartan. Retrieval is not recommended, and is judged to be highly dangerous. Let our deaths not be in shame.

Telys was furious. Every human he could find was dead, yet still the artifact eluded him. His Banshees stated that they saw some shapes moving into the mountains, and he was sure that some of the humans had escaped with the artifact. He would find them, and he would taste their blood.

Alex bent over, coughing up flem from the long sprint. His men looked at him, bewilderment and hope in their eyes. Everyone's helmets were off, as they needed the air. He looked around, casually running his left hand through his wet hair. Sweat dripped down his face, and he rubbed it from his eyes. The Spartan just stood, waiting. It held a funny looking device in its hand. It looked like a Covenant device.

"Nice rattle, 84. Is that what we're all dying for?"

"Affirmative, Major." The Spartan always was a man of few words and many actions. If it weren't that son of a bitch, though, they wouldn't be alive. He had single handedly fought his way through a swarm of grunts and jackals, blasted down a whole crap load of drones, and then grabbed the flamethrower off of a dead man's body. Once he had the flamethrower, he used it to create walls of fire, scaring the crap out of the little grunts, and buying them enough time to run like hell before the elites and hunters noticed them. They had run for at least an hour into the mountain, taking winding trails, and then turned off all of their electronics. No need to advertise their position. Alex laid his head down on a first aid kit. They had decided to camp out in some alcoves, to give them shelter from weather and flying ships. The small box was softer than anything else they had. Sure, they'd go back later to grab some gear and food, but right now, they just had to wait. He liked that idea, that and a nap. Yup, definitely a nap.

7. Trialsch7

Lok drifted in the endless night of sleep. He heard the sounds of battle around him, and was saddened that he could not join his brothers. He felt cold steel reaching to eat his very heart, and he dreamed. He dreamed of armored devils, and bright, blue eyed oracles, of mindless Jiralhanae, and of a single, skilled, honorable Sangheili, willing to give everything for his ancestors. He dreamed of legends, and he dreamed deep.

Deep in the belly of the Covenant cruiser, Sacred Trust, Lok slowly awoke, the blurry world coming into focus a little detail at a time. He was lying face down on a metal table, cushioned with round and square blue pads attached firmly to the bed. It was a medical pod. The walls curved upward, and met in a red light, a scanner keeping track of his vitals. Lok could smell blood, and his side began to ache. He reached down, probing for the wound, but it was gone, only a tender spot remained. He turned his head, sore and stiff from his awkward position. There stood a small, light blue armored Unggoy. It shrank away from his glare, and stammered out its message,

"Take good care of you, master warrior, I did! You are healed now! Knife in you no more! Machines fixed your insides too, so you no scar from bad hurt, and Lord Commander say you are very special now. You must rest so you can see him soon. Sleep now, I give you chems to sleep good, yes?" The creature's nervous blithering made Lok's head ache, either that, or made him realize just how bad his head hurt. He wished he had the strength to reach out and cuff it for its gibbering, but his body only twitched with the effort. The creature got the hint, though, and quickly administered the painkillers and sleep aids. Lok fell into darkness again.

Major Alex Kistler rolled over, and his head bounced against a rock.

"Ow! Geezâ€¦|what theâ€¦|" His mind cleared and he began to remember where he was. The Special Forces he commanded, wearing their reinforced black armor, and carrying visored helmets, strolled around him, busy cleaning weapons, cooking food, and catching some sleep. They had barely escaped the compound with their lives, and had been hiding from the Covenant since. That was two days ago. Now, they were just about out of food, and running low on ammunition. It was time to

go back.

Alex sat up, rubbing his face with his hands. He turned his head and spit. His troops already knew what they were going to do, and he still had a few hours until it was time to start. Hopefully 84 would return before dark, the Spartan would be really useful in the raid. He wondered what it was that the Spartan did all day, off by himself.

84 strolled through the small mountain pass. He had ambushed another tracking party. This one had been too close to their trail for his liking. The enemy commander was getting smart, either that, or there was someone new in charge. The enemy patrols had gone from wandering aimlessly in circular patterns, to surrounding the area in a 5-mile radius circle, and closing straight in. With their new strategy, it would be much harder to slip through their lines and escape. Would have been much harder, that is, except that he had been randomly ambushing and killing their patrols. The only thing that bugged him about the patrols though, is that he had to kill them with Covenant weapons. He had run out of ammo for his shotgun the first night they escaped, and his SMG had only two magazines. Those were gone within twelve hours. Now he carried a pair of Covenant plasma pistols, nearly confident that they were almost fully charged. He hated their weapons. They reminded him of toys he'd seen back home.

Something about the patrols bugged 84. There were only jackals and grunts in the patrols, and that left a lot of elites and hunters unaccounted for. There had been a Covenant cruiser right above the compound, but that had left this morning. It was probably in orbit, sending word back to their home system. They had to do something soon, or they would run out of options.

Telys was getting mad. The Master Commander was still in his ship. It took a few days to completely strip a human ship of its needed information, and its crew of their information. There had been four or five prisoners from the captured human ship, and the Master Commander had captured them himself. It was humiliating. Despite the fact that he had faced nearly four times as many armed Infidels, he had only one prisoner to speak of, and it was captured by a Phalanx of initiates. He would speak to the human soon. He simply had to wait until its claimer woke. It was dishonorable to harm or abuse the claimed property and trophies of an underling without the underling's permission. He could get the information without permission, of course, but it gave him an excuse to wait. That gave him more time to hunt the survivors. How they had broken through his line, he did not know. Telys vowed, however, not to make that mistake again. His life and honor depended on it.

Lok woke again, this time the world came sharply into focus. He smelled the Unggoy again, but this time, he could make out the pungent aroma of fear. He rolled onto his back and sat up, looking at the soft walls. The floor in a healing pod was separate from the ship's floor, and floated on anti-grav projectors. This allowed the platform to stay steady even if the ship rocks or moves from sudden course changes. It kept the wounded from getting even more injured, or from falling from their beds.

Lok stood up, and looked around himself. His armor hung on a stand near the back, where it should be. His carbine lay directly below it. The little light blue Unggoy, his armor the color of blood, checked

its data screen projected in front of it. He guessed it was trying to look busy so he wouldn't hurt it. He didn't need to injure it, and didn't consider himself cruel, so he merely retrieved his armor, donned it, and grabbed his weapon.

"Send to the Master Commander, tell them that their warrior will be seen at their earliest convenience." The Unggoy tapped controls with panicked speed. It looked up.

"Master Commander says eat, and then see him. He says he in battle room, master warrior." The creature spoke quickly, possibly hoping to rid itself of him sooner. He decided to humor the little beast, and left.

Lok strode to the Nutrition Hall. It was shaped in a circle, with a large glowing dome. Grav chutes led to carious hovering platforms, and alcoves. He was a Sangheili, though, and so was allowed to eat on the ground. He activated one of the dispensers, and it spit out chak. That meant they were still on battle standby, and no decent food could be consumed until they were done. He picked up the green and brown spheres, and walked to one of the tables. It had no chairs, Sangheili stood when they ate. It was patronizing to sit in another Sangheili's presence, unless they were of lesser station than you.

Lok saw that there were several other Sangheili at the eating table. Most wore the black armor of assault troops, or the light gray of ultras. There must have been a battle in space, as he recalled only azure, ivory, and crimson warriors on the drop. He did see a face that he recognized, the only other initiate at the table, shining azure armor worn proudly. Lok walked over and crouched beside Fausla.

"Brother." There was an exchange of nods.

"Brother. Good to see you well again. I have a gift for you." Fausla stopped chewing his chak, and pulled a small wrapped object from his hip. He handed it to Lok, who put his own chak down to accept.

"I am honored, Fausla." Lok set down the clothed object and peered at it before opening it, trying to imagine what it could be. He noticed the other Sangheili warriors had taken an interest as well, and their eyes pierced him like blades. He reached down and slowly unwrapped the parcel. When he saw what it was, he could not help his mandibles from quivering with pleasure. He picked the sharp, serrated combat knife up in his hand, feeling the soft handgrip in his palm. Fausla had kept the knife that had been removed from Lok's body, and had given it to him as a trophy.

"And what of the human, brother? Has our Field Master claimed him as prize, or have we been honored with the glory of his capture?"

"No brother, you have been honored with the glory of his capture. Much praise be to your name. The Master Commander will be most generous to you this day, I think. Quickly, eat, as I am sure you have heard his summons."

"I have indeed, Fausla." Lok reached down and picked up his chak. Chak was the standard military provision of the Sangheili. It was poison to Unggoy, and made the Kig-yar sick for cycles on end. The

Jiralhanae refused to eat it, period, and the Lokgolo had their own special diet to worry about. He wrapped his mandibles around it, and tore a large piece from the spherical food. His second set of teeth at the back of his mouth space diced the chak into mush, which he then swallowed. Its bitter taste stained his mouth. Luckily, it had no smell to accompany. After devouring his chak, he stood up from his crouch, and gave his fellow warriors their customary head bow. They returned with nods, and he left.

Lok took the central beam transport. It was a green beam of light that ran along the top of the ship's insides like the spine of some great animal. It was over a dozen paces wide, and had many small platforms and bridges leading out to it. He walked along one of the bridges, and then stepped into the beam's light. It shot him with tremendous speed across the ship, where he was deposited on another small bridge, in the middle of the mighty vessel. Lok thanked the gods once again for their mighty gifts, as he stepped into the grav chute to be lowered to his destination.

The Master Commander was floating idly in the Combat Command Chamber. The CCC was located at the center of the ship, its heart. It was a spherical room with no gravity. This allowed the commander to float through the space of the large sphere easily. Tiny grav thrusters attached to his waist like a belt assisted in quick movements. In the center of the room, holograms appeared. Currently, a hologram replayed the events from the ground in real-time. It was like a three-dimensional movie, with identification tags, designating names, ranks, vehicle status, targets, events and structures. The Master Commander floated around the large, glowing map, watching the little figures of light dance across it, reenacting the battle. He seemed very interested in a small group of Sangheili in the human's cannon structure. The Master Commander's gold armor shimmered in the light cast from the diorama, rimming his body in an aura of light.

Lok waited patiently. The warrior before him was a veteran of a hundred battles, victor of dozens of duels, and slayer of over a thousand foes. His accomplishments were to be respected and revered, his honor an example to all those of lesser station. Lok lowered his head in customary humility. After what seemed an eternity, the golden Sangheili noticed him waiting.

"Ahh, young warrior, I wish to have a few words with you. Is this your unit here, assaulting the weapon of the Infidels?"

"Yes, your lordship."

"Is this the entrance you used?"

"Yes."

"By your visual records, we determined that this human was present. Is this also correct?" A three dimensional model appeared of the copper colored demon.

"Yes, that is also correct, lord master. May I ask what the importance is of this particular Infidel? He fought nobly, and with great skill, but I heard of little glory accomplished by him."

"Initiate, this is one of their most honored warriors. A Spartan. We

heard much of him from the dying voices of his comrades. They honor him with their words. His is the kind that destroyed the sacred ring, and who determined the weak point in our forces. It is his fault that any of the Infidels escaped at all. He has gained much glory from this battle. I am impressed that you fought him, and survived. Few warriors can boast such a feat. Your Uncle was not so fortunate. You have my regards, and promise that he died with honor, and shall not be forgotten. I have learned much of this demon through your vision, and for that I honor you. This to, I honor you for." A second model appeared, this time of the human who Lok had fought, and whom had pierced his side with the dagger now strapped to Lok's waist. "This human knows a great deal about his friends. I will inquire no more from him, though; as such questions would destroy his frail body. You may keep your trophy this day. I hope to see more of you, Lok Duk'amee. When you have rested, report to Templar Zomee. He will see that you return to the surface. I want you to help find these Infidels, and retrieve the holy artifact. Glory and honor, warrior."

"Victory be thy name, Master Commander." Lok dipped his head low, and drifted back out of the Combat Command Chamber. His blood was alive with fire. He had been honored by the Master Commander, and with a little more experience in his heart; he would soon wear the crimson of a veteran. He decided that he could rest on the surface, and so headed straight for the docking bays, eager to see battle again.

End
file.